



One Sees What One Sees

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In the old days, American painters emigrated to Paris, not American writers. James McNeill Whistler found in Paris a culture willing to contemplate contrarian painting, almost eager for outrage; and in fact Whistler exhibited at the 1863 Salon des Refusés along with Manet. An Anglophone writer had less incentive to take part in French culture. Why then did Gertrude Stein decide in 1903 to settle in Paris? One reason was that she wanted to live in a place where no babbling in English would interfere with her private meditations on the English language: “But do you never read french, I ... asked her. No ... I have liked all these years ... to be surrounded by people who know no english. ... I like living with so very many people and being all along with english and myself” (*Selected Writings*, pp. 64-65). Another reason was that in Paris there was a there there.

The *there* was for Stein, as it had been for Whistler, a culture of the visual arts. Stein and her brother Leo became two of most determined, thorough, and incisive collectors of contemporary painting; and they soon got to know an obscure painter from Spain, Pablo Picasso, who became, apart from Toklas, the closest friend of Gertrude Stein’s life. Picasso did not like to exhibit, so those who wished to see his paintings were well advised to visit 27, Rue de Fleurus, the home of Stein and her companion Alice B. Toklas, in which every vertical surface was being crammed with pictures by Matisse, Cézanne, Picasso, and other now-canonical masters. If the Stein salon became a valuable source of intellectual ferment, it was partly because of the extraordinary acuity of the hostess, and partly because *entrée* was the only ticket to Paris’s best museum of modernist art.

Stein believed that painting and literature were distinct, and disapproved strongly when Picasso began to write poems—“the egoism of a painter is not at all the egoism of a writer” (*Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, p. 67)—but nevertheless she and Picasso co-evolved in remarkable ways. During 1905-6 Picasso had Stein endure eighty or ninety sittings for a portrait; in the end he painted out the face and remade as a stark blank staring thing, confrontational in a way that anticipated the famous African masks in *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* of 1907. Stein’s face, then, along with certain figures from Africa and ancient Iberia, became part of the visual complex that helped Picasso achieve the cubist revolution. But Stein had already transformed her own art with the help of an African (or African-American) mask, Melanctha (in *Three Lives*, written in 1905):

I wrote a negro story called Melanctha. In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. ... I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one (*Selected Writings*, p. 517)

Stein was to be much attracted to cubism’s all-overness, its way of treating every square inch of the canvas as equally significant—“Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously” (Haas, *Gertrude Stein A Primer*, p. 15). If Stein applauded the ways in which the cubists, following Cézanne, cut up the sky and the foreground with complete impartiality, it may have been because “Melanctha” was, in this sense, a cubist story before cubism existed.

As she wrote *Three Lives*, Stein kept her desk positioned in front of Cézanne’s portrait of his wife; and a certain Cézannesque quality can be felt. The textual foreground and the textual

background are minimally distinguished:

Jeff Campbell had always all his life loved to be with people, and he had loved all his life always to be thinking, but he was still only a great boy, was Jeff Campbell, and he had never before had any of this funny kind of feeling. ...

"I know you are a good man, Jeff. I always know that, no matter how much you can hurt me." "I sure don't see how you can think so, Melanctha, if you certainly did think I was trying so hard just to hurt you." "Hush, you are only a great big boy, Jeff Campbell, and you don't know anything yet about real hurting." (*Three Lives*, pp. 136, 141)

The narrator's stream of nobody's-consciousness-in-particular anticipates the language of the dialogue that hasn't occurred yet ("a great boy"); and the Negro vernacular hovers oddly close to Stein-speak ("if you certainly did think"), as if the speech patterns of simple people were a part of figuration of the most advanced modernism. The cultivation of the "continuous present" is also a form of all-overness: instead of a graduated field in which sensation deepens into memory, Stein presents an equably lit verbal surface in which neither recollection nor hope disrupts the steady insistence on immediate feeling. The characters simply roll down the slightly inclined plane of their lives.

Stein disliked Picasso's use of African masks: she called them a "crutch" (*Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, p. 28), and regarded them as a diversion from his true path. If the character of a poor black woman provided Stein with something she found useful, it was not because of any respect for African-American culture. As she wrote after meeting Paul Robeson,

negroes were not suffering from persecution, they were suffering from nothingness. She always contends th[at] the african is not primitive, he has a very ancient but a very narrow culture and there it remains. Consequently nothing does or can happen. (*Selected Writings*, p. 224)

The character of Melanctha offered Stein an empty expanse, a free space that offered no resistance to any text she might wish to write on it. Stein later was to define a successful play as a play in which "nothing was happening . . . after all Hamlet Shakespeare's most interesting play has really nothing happening except that they live and die" (*Everybody's Autobiography*, p. 292). A nothing character was from Stein's point of view irresistible.

If Picasso and Stein came to Africa independently, and with different intentions, the case of *Tender Buttons* shows Stein in the act of learning lessons from Picasso. Stein thought that Picasso's genius lay in his faculty for seeing what was *there*, the object unencumbered with the normal contexts of things—not the object as we know it ought to be:

Really most of the time one sees only a feature of a person with whom one is, the other features are covered by a hat, by the light, by clothes for sport and everybody is accustomed to complete the whole entirely from their knowledge, but Picasso when he saw an eye, the other one did not exist for him . . . one sees what one sees, and the rest is a reconstruction from memory and painters have nothing to do with reconstruction (*Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, p. 22)

When Picasso failed, says Stein, it is because "interpretations destroyed his own vision" (*Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, p. 68). The painter's gaze should be at once intelligent and radically mindless, without preconception, without interpretation.

To realize this goal in the domain of literature, Stein abandoned her old style and tried to

write what she called “still life”: “she been interested only in the insides of people, their character and what went on inside them, it was during that summer [in Spain] that she first felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world.” The result was *Tender Buttons* (1913; 1914), a book that offers objects that possess none of the usual consolations of objectivity. Here is one of the poems:

A DOG

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

In the last year of her life, 1946, Stein tried to tell an interviewer what she meant by “A Dog”: “‘A little monkey goes like a donkey . . .’ That was an effort to illustrate the movement of a donkey going up a hill, you can see it plainly. ‘A little monkey goes like a donkey.’ An effort to make the movement of the donkey, and so the picture hangs complete” (Haas, *Gertrude Stein A Primer*, p. 24). It is, then, a text not meant to be read but to be felt as a rhythm, partly a rhythm of walking (a patient plod?), partly a collage-rhythm of congruence among components: just as, in Picasso, the outline of half a guitar might mimic the curve of a woman’s body cut from an advertisement and pasted to the canvas, so the rhymes, the stutters, the losses of momentum, try to mimic—what? Stein told Virgil Thomson that *Tender Buttons* was “‘an effort to describe something without naming it,’ which is what the cubist painters were doing with still life” (Thomson, *Thomson Reader*, p. 548). The poem tries for an object-status equal in dignity with the object it describes, but in the absence of a name the object behind the poem remains a riddle, as certain cubist paintings remain riddles.

Stein’s influence on French literature was marginal. Except for Georges Hugnet there were few French writers among her intimates; and her distaste for surrealism, for every dreamy, semi-conscious, un-alert artistic style, made her exclude many of the most vibrant writers from her circle—“The surrealists still see things as everyone sees them, they complicate them in a different way but the vision is that of every one else” (*Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, p. 65). But her influence on English literature was strong. When Hemingway was a young expatriate, writing the stories that became *In our Time*, she worked closely with him. Alice B. Toklas called him a “rotten pupil” (*Selected Writings*, p. 204), but he nevertheless learned much from her:

I’d come back and sit down beside him and he’d pull a rope out of his pocket and start skipping rope out in the sun with the sweat pouring off his face and him skipping rope out in the white dust with the rope going cloppetty, cloppetty, clop, clop, clop, and the sun hotter, and him working harder up and down a patch of the road. (*In our Time*, p. 152)

This sentence is so paratactic, alliterative that it could be rearranged into Old Germanic verse:

I’d come **back** and sit down **beside** him
and he’d **pull** a rope out of his **pocket**
and **start** skipping rope out in the **sun**
with the **sweat** pouring off his face and him **skipping** rope
out in the **white** dust with the rope going

cloppety, cloppety clop, clop, clop,
and the sun hotter and him working harder
up and down a patch of the road..

This is less a description of a man skipping rope than a verbal incarnation of a man skipping rope. The sentence shapes itself intimately to the jumpy, first accelerating, then tiring rhythm of the exercise.

Where did Hemingway learn this trick of experimenting with the plasticity of parataxis to create peculiar sentence rhythms? Not from reading Old Germanic, but from close attention to Stein's prose. In 1924 Hemingway persuaded Ford Madox Ford to serialize part of Stein's immense novel *The Making of Americans*, an almost inconceivably paratactic work:

Sometime then there will be every kind of a history of every one who ever can or is or was or will be living. Sometime then there will be a history of every one from their beginning to their ending. Sometime then there will be a history of all of them, of every kind of them, of every one . . . (Stein, *Selected Writings*, p. 246)

In a lecture Stein read this passage and commented, "In *The Making of Americans* . . . my sentences grew longer and longer, my imaginary dependent clauses were constantly being dropped out, I struggled with relations between they them and then" (*Selected Writings*, p. 248). Hemingway was to make a career out of eliminating dependent clauses.

Stein looks like an easy writer to parody, but her canny trickiness tends to exceed that of her parodists; Hemingway was one of the few writers who could successfully spoof her: "They did not try [to have a baby] very often on the boat cause Mrs. Elliot was quite sick. She was sick and when she was sick she was sick as Southern women are sick. That is women from the Southern part of the United States. Like all Southern women Mrs. Elliot disintegrated very quickly under sea sickness" (*In our Time*, p. 109). This passage is of course satire—an infantile prose style to reflect the rudimentary intellects of the Elliot couple. Hemingway beautifully captures Stein's vertigos of simplicity.

The story of Stein and Hemingway is well known; but her influence extends to many odd places. Edith Sitwell's *Façade* poems have something of the hypervirtuosic childlikeness of Stein's work; and Sitwell herself said (*A Stein Reader*, p. 315) that the end of Stein's *Accents in Alsace* inspired her "Jodelling Song":

We bear velvet cream,
Green and babyish
Small leaves seem; each stream
Horses' tails that swish.

According to Sitwell, "The poems in *Façade* are abstract poems--that is, they are patterns in sound. They are . . . virtuoso exercises in technique of extreme difficulty, in the same sense as that in which certain studies by Liszt are studies in transcendental technique in music" (*The Canticle of the Rose*, p. xii). Yeats commented on another *Façade* poem, "Ass-Face," "When you listen to this poem, you should become two people, one a sage . . . one a child listening to a poem as irrational as a 'Sing a Song of Sixpence'" (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 502). To be child and sage is also good advice for reading Stein.

Perhaps most unexpected of all is Stein's influence on Samuel Beckett. In 1937 Beckett wrote of the "logographs" of Stein, and approved of the ways in which Stein had made her

speech tissue (*Sprachgewebe*) “porous” (*Disjecta*, p. 53). Maniacal porosity is a feature of some of Beckett’s prose:

it was not rare to find, on the Sunday, the tallboy on its feet by the fire, and the dressing-table on its head by the bed, and the night-stool on its face by the door, and the washhand-stand on its back by the window; and on the Monday, the tallboy on its back by the bed, and the dressing-table on its face by the door, and the washhand-stand on its feet by the fire (*Watt*, pp. 204-5)

Indeed the text is composed with such a wide weave that it will hold nothing at all—a sieve that’s all hole.

Borges wrote that every great writer creates a body of precursors, and I will end with a glimpse backward, at Stein’s retrospective influence, so to speak. There is a peculiar piece by Jonathan Swift called *A Compleat Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation* (1738), full of passages such as this:

Neverout. Miss, what spells b double uzzard?

Miss. Buzzard in your teeth, Mr. Neverout.

Lady Smart. Now you are up, Mr. Neverout, will you do me the favour to do me the kindness to take off the tea-kettle?

Lord Sparkish. I wonder what makes these bells ring. (*Satires and Personal Writings*, p. 226)

If Gertrude Stein had never been born, this would seem a freakish and incomprehensible text. It still seems freakish and incomprehensible, but as an anticipation of Stein it is made familiar, assimilated into a canon that she caused to exist.